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ABSTRACT

A survey investigated the attitudes of one community college's English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers concerning the use of native language in the classroom, particularly by the teacher. Twenty-one ESL teachers, both part- and full-time, responded. Most were Hispanic, many were bilingual, and they represented a range of experience and training. A majority believed all ESL teachers at the college should know some Spanish for classroom use. Only 10 percent had a rule of English use only in the classroom, but many reported that their students use English over 90 percent of the time. Some expressed frustration over students' apparent unwillingness to persist in English, particularly during group work. Others found limited first-language talk acceptable if related to the work at hand. (MSE)

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English Only?
Community College Teacher Perceptions of L1 Use

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The use of students' native language in the ESL classroom is a topic which has recently re-surfaced in professional publications (v. **TESOL Journal**, Winter 1993-94). Throughout the history of language teaching, opinions over L1 use in the classroom have been sharply divided. For example, entire methodologies have been based on the L1, as in the early Grammar-Translation Method, and in recent times, Contrastive Analysis. The pendulum has also swung, and continues to swing, in the opposite direction. Since the 80s, ESL and foreign language instruction have been based on communicative frameworks (i.e., the "Natural Approach") which exclude use of the L1.

A common assumption of current ESL methodology is that instructors do **not** need to speak their students' native language(s) in order to teach effectively. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that a

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typical ESL class may contain students of a multitude of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. There is no doubt that in such situations, exclusive use of the target language is a must. However, in language teaching environments where students form a homogeneous group, the situation is less clear cut. In the U.S., along the border that is shared with Mexico, Mexican immigrants far outnumber other immigrant groups, forming a simple ethnic and linguistic mix from which ESL students are drawn. This preliminary study was undertaken to examine this unique ESL environment from the perspective of ESL teachers at a community college.

Imperial Valley College is a rural California community college located ten miles from the U.S.-Mexican border; over 800 students were enrolled in the four-semester ESL program during the fall of 1994. Full- and part-time ESL teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire, designed to investigate teacher perceptions and attitudes toward L1 use in the classroom. Particular focus was on use of the L1 by the teachers themselves, with lesser focus on student use.

Twenty-one surveys were returned, out of the 38 that were distributed. Instructors who returned the surveys are typical of the entire population: most are part-time

(70%) and also teach in public schools. Most are Hispanic (62%) and many are bilingual (43%). Experience levels vary, but a large percentage have over 15 years of ESL teaching experience; academic preparation in language teaching varies from M.A. degrees to one or two courses.

Respondents overwhelmingly (71%) reported the belief that all teachers of ESL at this college "should know **some** Spanish" but stopped short of saying that they should know Spanish **well**). The rationale for this seemed to be provided by their (76%) support of the statement that "a little bit of Spanish from time to time can help" students. Two-thirds of the respondents noted that this is especially true for beginning students. The great majority of the teachers reported that they **do** use Spanish in their classes. In attempting to pinpoint when teachers use the L1, it was found that most of the respondents use the L1 to provide a short or quick explanation of a concept (57%) and to provide the Spanish equivalent of an English word (43%). Their reasons for doing so were that using the L1 is "easier for the students" than explaining in English (38%) or that using Spanish is simply a last resort (43%). One teacher commented that after many years of teaching in this environment, she had come to the realization that "a

quick translation or a fast and short comment can be a real time saver . . . we can answer a question and keep going rather than lose our focus during a long English explanation." Regardless of teaching area (grammar, reading, writing, vocabulary, oral English), instructors' explanations tend to be "mostly in English" but in response to student questions, many teachers (62%) reported using class time to give explanations in Spanish. Teacher attitudes toward translation varied, but the majority (71%) expressed the belief that translation in any ESL class is only "occasionally" or "rarely" useful.

Regarding use of the L2 among students, only 10% of the instructors reported that their classroom rule or practice is "English only"; however, a large number reported that their students speak the L2 over 90% of the time. Some teachers expressed frustration over students' apparent unwillingness to stay in English, particularly during group work. Others found limited student L1 talk to be acceptable, if the talk is related to the work at hand.

Conclusions

Certainly, this survey reveals that at this college, there is much more teacher talk and student talk in the L1 than in "typical" heterogeneous ESL classes. But this should not be considered apart from the surrounding socio-cultural milieu of the border. The overwhelming majority of residents here are Hispanic (75%). ESL students frequently say that they have "no one to practice with", and there is an element of truth to this. It is indeed difficult to go anywhere, whether to the post office, grocery store, or college cafeteria, where Spanish is not heard. Moreover, students have few non-Hispanic classmates with whom they must use English as a lingua franca. Thus, the usual social and cultural forces that contribute to the acquisition of a second language are conspicuously absent in this rural area along the U.S.-Mexican border. It is to the students' credit that they learn English in a part of the country which bears similarities to an EFL environment.

A Spanish-speaking teacher has distinct advantages over a non-Spanish-speaking teacher in such a linguistically homogenous classroom. With a few words of the L1, teachers are able to get to the heart of the

matter when students require explanation or clarification. Language acquisition is enhanced rather than hindered. The majority of these community college ESL teachers conclude that prudent, limited use of the L1 permits them to tailor instruction to the specific needs of their adult students; strict adherence to a policy of "English only" is not feasible.